

Myer Feldman Oral History Interview – JFK#8, 8/6/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Feldman, (1914 - 2007); Legislative assistant to Senator John F. Kennedy (1958-1961); Deputy Special Counsel to the President (1961-1964); Counsel to the President (1964-1965), discusses the atmosphere in the White House after Inauguration, preparing the State of the Union Address and subsequent messages, and Kennedy's televised press conferences, among other issues.

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Myer Feldman – JFK #8

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Eighth Oral History Interview

with

MYER FELDMAN

August 6, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: In the last interview you had discussed your involvement in a number of appointments. I was wondering if you could continue and discuss of the other appointments?

FELDMAN: Which were the ones I discussed again?

STEWART: You had gone over Ribicoff [Abraham A. Ribicoff], Rusk [Dean Rusk], Freeman [Orville Lothrop Freeman], Hodges [Luther H. Hodges], McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], McGovern [George S. McGovern] and you talked

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about the luncheon you had with Charlie Murphy [Charles S. Murphy] who was appointed...

FELDMAN: Undersecretary of Agriculture...

STEWART: Right.

FELDMAN: That's right. I also had something to do with the appointment of Ed Day [J. Edward Day]. I didn't make the recommendation but I knew what was going on. And perhaps I might describe what happened then as far as I knew it. We had a good deal of trouble finding a good postmaster general. I had discussed with the President-elect the factors that would go into making a good postmaster general. I think he generally agreed we ought to have somebody from the business community preferably. We should not have a politician. He didn't believe we should be in the tradition of Farley [James A. Farley] but rather that we should be in the tradition of Harry Truman's postmaster general

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who was not a politician; was not chairman of the Democratic Committee; but instead was an active, effective businessman. John F. Kennedy considered the Post Office not so much a policy making position as a business. Therefore a businessman was the kind of a person we were looking for. By the time we got around to postmaster general we had made appointments from all sections of the country except the far West. We had Stewart Udall, of course, but we didn't have anybody from California, Oregon, Washington, or those states on the Pacific Coast. California was an important state. And ideally we ought to have a postmaster general that came from California. I think there was somebody we considered from Illinois too. But I've forgotten. But, anyhow, California was the state that we were looking to for some appointment of some significance. And

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it seemed that it would be ideal if a man having the qualifications that John F. Kennedy sought came from the West Coast. I don't know who suggested Ed Day. All I know is that he must have been suggested and accepted very quickly because on one day Kennedy did not know who he was going to appoint and just two or three days later he told me that the appointment was going to go to Ed Day. I had known Ed Day. I'd worked with Ed Day or rather opposed Ed Day in some litigation. When I was with the Security Exchange Commission one of my cases involved a variable annuities insurance company. Ed Day was then General counsel or vice president or something with Prudential which had tried to sell insurance very much like the insurance that we said could not be sold because it violated the securities law.

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So, I had met Ed and I knew him casually from that case. When Kennedy mentioned him I recognized the name and I told him what I knew of Ed. It was within twenty-four hours that the announcement was made that Ed was appointed.

STEWART: Were candidates being suggested by both Brown [Edmund G. Brown] and Unruh [Jesse M. Unruh]? It seemed to me I heard that at one time. The fast timing had something connected with that.

FELDMAN: Well, I don't know anything about that. I do know that it was very quick because he didn't know who was going to be appointed one day and just a couple of days later he knew. And the appointment was made immediately as distinguished from the other appointments where they went through some process of selection; really close analysis.

STEWART: Did he know Ed Day personally?

FELDMAN: No, he didn't know Ed either. I asked

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Ed after the appointment was made and after Ed came to Washington and I got to know him fairly well; I asked Ed when he first heard about it. He told me he first heard about it about twenty-four hours before the appointment was announced. So, all this fits in with my thought that this was done quickly, but with a good deal of prior thought about the qualifications that were needed for this position. We did not regard, as I say, the job of postmaster general as a policy making job.

Indeed in one conversation I had with the President a good many months later I suggested, and I think he tended to agree with me, that the postmaster general didn't really belong in the Cabinet. The postmaster general was more like the General Services administrator. It was an administrative job. Maybe the

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Post Office Department ought to be an administrative agency rather than a Cabinet office. Now, no one suggested that this job be eliminated from the Cabinet, but this was the way in which it was considered. I think from a hindsight point of view that this in part caused some unhappiness in the relationship between Ed Day and President Kennedy. President Kennedy did not consult with him a great deal. He had a great deal of difficulty getting into see the President. He more often dealt with the staff than he did with the President. And I think this caused the friction between him and his Deputy. Bill Brawley [H.W. Brawley] now was a logical choice for Deputy Postmaster General. It was almost unanimous by everybody that this was the person who should assist Ed Day because he knew the Post Office Department. He had been a

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staunch supporter and he had a good deal of Congressional support; support from the postal unions and everybody else. So, there was no problem about Brawley. But they were reluctant to make Brawley postmaster general. They thought he'd be good as deputy postmaster general.

Now, after Day was appointed, because of the attitude of the President towards the position of Postmaster General and because Brawley knew the White House staff better than

Day did – Brawley in a way was an intimate of the White House staff, while Day was somebody who had come in at the last minute – I think that Day resented it a little bit. Friction began to develop and it mounted steadily. Day accused Brawley of going over his head; of undermining his position; of talking to the White House about critical matters without consulting him; of a great variety of

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things. As far as I know Dave Brawley didn't do any of these things when he discussed the Post Office matters with me, which was fairly often. It was only in the context that Day would have discussed it if Brawley wasn't there. But at any rate the antagonism between Day and Brawley became so great that as we know, ultimately, we were confronted with something in the nature of an ultimatum; that either Day leave or Brawley leave. And we decided to move Brawley out and keep Day, at least for the time being. So, let me see now. That accounts for the appointment of Ed Day.

I don't think really there's any need to go into the other appointments. Most of the others were minor. I was consulted or had something to say about many of the regulatory agencies. Landis [James M. Landis] was consulted about the regulatory

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agencies at first. And Landis gave us a report on how they were to be revamped. In fact he gave me drafts of reorganization plans for many of the regulatory agencies. It's too bad that we can't get his statements on tape because he had a great deal to do in fashioning our ideas about regulatory agencies. But, after the first flurry of his reports President Kennedy called me in one day and said that he thought I ought to take a look at the regulatory agencies and be aware of what they were doing. The reason for that was the kind of publicity that Landis was getting. The papers were beginning to report that Landis was going to act as a czar for the regulatory agencies. And this, of course, was contrary to the President's notion. And I don't believe Jim Landis had anything to do with the newspaper reports.

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But it was embarrassing for the administration for these reports to be published. Therefore, although Landis continued to be active, in a sense he worked for me rather than for the President. He had less and less access to the President. And when he wanted something done he very often came to me. He would ask that I go to the President and present a particular problem. However, as I said, he worked on regulatory agency problems. He developed various proposals on which I commented. And we would send them into the President for his comments. I don't have those reports before me nor do I have my own comments but I assume they'll be available for the Library at some point.

STEWART: So do I. Did you have any more on that or....?

FELDMAN: No, I don't think we need to go through

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person by person. That's not particularly significant.

STEWART: You had mentioned in the last interview something about the general atmosphere of the White House. I think you said there was a certain amount of tension and that tension was building up as January twentieth approached. Do you want to discuss in general whether this continued or just what the general atmosphere was after the Inauguration?

FELDMAN: Well, I believe that the people coming into the White House were a little bit unsure of themselves. None of us had ever had responsibilities of this nature. And none of us, from the President on down, knew how to run a country. All of us were very much aware of our inadequacies. I don't know whether I mentioned on the last tape the most comforting thing....I think I did.

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STEWART: Yes, yes you did.

FELDMAN: The visit I had there. [Laughter] After that we felt a lot better about it. But, still the very first day was a pretty traumatic day. After the Inauguration we didn't go back to the White House. We came in bright and early the next morning. All of us gathered in the Fish Room to be sworn in. I came in a little late. I was supposed to be there at nine o'clock for the swearing in and I came in a few minutes after nine. I think Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] was even later. I think he missed the swearing in. Oh yes, I'm sure he was later and I'm sure he missed the swearing in. But he was sworn in separately later on because he overslept. This was an awful thing to do on the first day in a position like that. But at any rate I came in shortly after nine. I wasn't very late.

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And I had hardly been sworn in when I was called by the President who was in a very bare office. There wasn't a thing in the office except what looked to me like an old and rather dilapidated desk and a rug on the floor that was no credit to the President of the United States. Underneath the rug the floor is like a cork floor. There are little pot marks in that floor. I noticed them immediately. But when I went into the President's office; into the Oval Room I didn't have time to talk about the floor and the way it was furnished. He said that he had promised that his first executive order would be one that improved the distribution of food to the needy. He dealt this commitment to the West Virginians and he was going to do something about it. He wanted the executive order number one, issued by him to do what he

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had promised to do during the campaign with regard to food for the needy. He asked me whether or not I could prepare such an order. I left the President's office and I left all the other people who were gathered around simply talking about what they were going to do and waiting for their assignments and got my secretary Mary Durkin and found a typewriter for her, not necessarily the room that I was going to have permanently. In fact I moved twice before I finally got a permanent room. But, I just went into a room with the typewriter and dictated the executive order number one. I brought it down maybe twenty or thirty minutes later. It must have been around ten o'clock in the morning and handed the President the and he said, "Well, now how do we do this?" You sign it there, we'll publish it and this will be your first executive order.

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And we'll give it to Pierre Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] and it will be announced at the press briefing. So, he read it and asked me some questions about what it did. I told him that this generally carried out what he said he was going to do. And so he signed it. At that time I didn't know what the regular practice was and I didn't know any of the operations of the White House. I just knew that we now had an order and so I went and gave it to Pierre and told him to publish it. Then I went around to find out what you usually do with an executive order after it's been adopted. I found then and I discovered later too that the person who was in charge of all these documents was Bill Hopkins [William J. Hopkins]. And if I just gave it to him he'd take care of all the mechanics of publication and I wouldn't have to worry about that – you know, publication of the

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notification of people, and so on. I also learned that I had short-circuited the bureaucracy in doing this. It became my responsibility to take care of all executive orders. And all executive orders were under my jurisdiction from that moment on all the time that I was in the White House.

STEWART: Because you wrote the first one?

FELDMAN: Well, I guess it was. This was about the way duties were assigned in the White House. If you did something once why then the President was likely to call on you to do everything else. The President always from then on asked me to draft the executive orders. And everybody just assumed that I was in charge of them. I learned after that – this was done in a very unorganized, unbureaucratic, simple way – but the second executive order went through the whole

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process. That one took less than an hour to dictate, prepare, sign and give out. And I had no repercussions from it. But I was told by everybody then: All the departments and all the

agencies; Bill Hopkins and everybody else that before you can prepare an executive order first you get the Bureau of Budget to okay it. Then you circulate it to all the departments. Then you give it to GSA to make sure that it's all right; that they don't have any comment on it. Then you bring it into the White House and you make sure that the language is appropriate. Then you check it possibly with the Attorney General. The process normally for an executive order takes three to four weeks. I was glad though that I didn't know then how long an executive order took and did that one that way, because it was more effective and there were no repercussions.

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But it was just as legal.

It was after the executive order was actually published that Ted, as a matter of fact, came in and asked me what I was doing. And I told him what I had done. Ted's job was Special Counsel and mine was Deputy Special Counsel. I'm not sure that he didn't think that he – well, maybe not – but maybe he should have worked on the executive order. Then after that was out of the way come back to January twenty-first.

I then had a chance to talk to the President a little bit in his office. And he told me that he had gone through that office with Ken Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] a day or two before. Either the preceding day or a couple of days before that. And they had noticed the same holes in the cork. They'd noticed that they led – the holes were bunched up around the desk, the

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President's desk – they led from the desk to the door. So Ken said, "Well they can't be termites." Although that's what those holes looked like. He was appalled at the notion that there might be termites in the White House. So, we thought for a minute and then we figured out what they were. They were from the spikes on Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower] gold shoes leading from the desk out the door and into the putting green, which was just outside the window. I walked a little bit which was the tension on that day. I think there was a good deal of tension leading up to the time that we assumed office. I think it disappeared very rapidly when we found that supermen had not occupied these positions before us. And indeed we felt that we were as good or better; as good or better team than they. We felt that our team was the best

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in history. That's a pretty good spirit to start out the White House year with. Man for man we compared our Cabinet with Cabinets from the past. And I know that most of the people in the White House felt that we could compare favorably with any of them.

STEWART: Did you have any further contact with the Eisenhower White House people after the twentieth?

FELDMAN: As I said, I think earlier, they were willing to consult with us at any time and made themselves available. We did not consult with them. I did see them. And some of them were friends of mine. I remember talking to one fellow, Ed Tait [Edward T. Tait], who I think did personnel work largely for Eisenhower and then became a commissioner of one of the commissions; Federal Trade Commission or something for a brief time before he left. I don't know what he's doing now. But Ed Tait took it

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upon himself to give me a lot of advice about what I should or should not do. But by that time we'd learned what we should and should not do. And each administration is quite different anyhow, so you couldn't take advantage of that. Jerry Morgan [Gerald D. Morgan] came in to see me on business. He represented some client. And Dave Kendall [David W. Kendall] came in again. He represented some distillery, I remember. And he had a problem with the sale of grain for a commodity credit corporation to his client. So he came in to talk to me about that. So, I saw them. I saw them either on business matters or, in some instances, because they were personal friends. But we did not consult with them. I don't know of anybody in the White House that consulted with his predecessors. I think we just decided we'd run it the way it suited our President. Each president runs the

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White House a different way. Each President has different ideas. And each administration has a different organization. There were differences in responsibilities. Pierre Salinger was not a Jim Hagerty [James C. Hagerty]. Jim Hagerty played a very large policy making role in the Eisenhower administration. I think because there was a vacuum in the policy field. Pierre Salinger didn't play a policy role. He did some other things; very important things, but he wasn't part of the policy making machinery. Similarly Kenny O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell] was a part of the policy machinery in addition to being appointment secretary. The Eisenhower appointment secretary did very little more than be just an appointment secretary. We had no Sherman Adams or General Persons. There was nobody that occupied the equivalent of that position. So, if we

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needed any history of the mechanics of how things were done we'd get that from Hopkins whose tenure went back several years. Moreover we had very extensive studies of the White House prepared by Dick Neustadt [Richard E. Neustadt] and Clark Clifford, both of whom had been in the White House before. And they told us about their – in their papers they told us about their conception of how the White House ought to be organized and what functions people should assume. We didn't follow that. We didn't follow that – not deliberately – but because each man what he's going to handle and the President decides what he's going to assign. Very often he'd just assign something to whoever happens to be in the office. This was very typical of Kennedy. It's also typical of Lyndon Johnson. There is no job

description for each position.

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STEWART: There was never any attempt to formalize, even at the beginning, to formalize responsibilities?

FELDMAN: No. But strangely enough....And they shifted. For instance, Fred Dutton [Frederick G. Dutton] started out as Cabinet secretary with various duties. When he left to go to the State Department nobody assumed those duties. But they kind of were spread around. Also the President started out by considering Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.] , I think, as an assistant on domestic matters. Schlesinger soon became the Latin American affairs and after a while United Nations advisor, because he happened to be in the President's office when these subjects came up and the President would ask his advice and ask him to look into it. Similarly if I were in his office when the foreign policy matter came up he'd be very likely to ask

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me to take care of it, although I had very little to do with foreign policy. I got into the tariff and trade fight and I think assumed most of the responsibilities dealing with tariff and trade matters because I was assigned to the Tariff Commission. And we were discussing Tariff Commission problems at the time the trade bill was the subject of discussion. So that there wasn't a clear table of organization for the White House. Nor was there a clear definition of the authority of each individual. But in spite of that it was fairly well organized. All of the top people knew to whom they should go on particular questions. All of us knew where the facts could be located; where the answers could be found on any particular problem. The mail room knew to whom to assign letters dealing with the various subjects. Of course I always said that if

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they didn't know where to assign it they just sent it to me, but....

STEWART: They made a lot of decisions as to who handled what?

FELDMAN: The letters weren't particularly important. In fact, I didn't see a good many letters that would go out. They'd be routine replies by my secretaries.

STEWART: What was your role in formulating 1) the State of the Union address; and 2) all of the definite proposals that followed from that? You had spoken in your last interview of your role in all of the task forces that had been set up during the interim period. Did you follow these up and work these into definite proposal or just what was your role in that whole....?

FELDMAN: Well, after the task force reports came in of course I had the job of analyzing them. Prior to the State of the Union address we took the task force reports; we took submissions

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by all the departments and agencies regarding what they considered important and what their programs they thought should be; and what they would recommend the President say. And we took an analysis that we made ourselves of our program as expressed by the President in his campaign speeches and put them all together. This was a very luminous document. The promises was one document; a chart we had prepared for each Cabinet officer isolating the important decisions that confronted him was another document; the Bureau of the Budget had prepared a book which set forth the position that each department and agency was taking on issues currently before them and the open questions on issues to come before them in the future; that was another substantial document. And then all of the suggestions, even for the language for the State of the Union

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Message, which, if adopted, would have made a State of the Union Message the size of an encyclopedia Britannica were all put together in another document. The job of putting that in address form – the form for an address – was Sorensen's. The President told Sorensen he didn't want a long one. He told me he wanted a relatively short statement. It was decided that he wanted to deliver it personally. Ted would then assign to me the job of going through a lot of this material and making suggestions concerning the important things. Where involved in an area with which I was especially familiar such as agriculture, integration, Justice Department problems then he asked me to actually work on the section and give him a draft. Where involved areas with which we were both familiar sometimes he'd ask me to do it,

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sometimes he'd do it himself. For instance with regard to health and education problems he was always very interested in that. That's where he started with the government. And this had always been an important interest of his so he worked on that himself. And where it involved areas with which neither one of us were very deeply – he tended to rely on other people, then redrafted it in the proper form. So, although I worked on the State of the Union address and I worked on it with Ted, Ted Sorensen was the fellow that put it together and really did the directing work and did the initial draft; discussed it with the President and did the revisions.

STEWART: This was much the same arrangement in formulating all the proposals that came?

FELDMAN: Well, no this is not the way we send special messages. That's just the State of the Union address. That's the way we did special

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messages to Congress.

Well, even before the State of the Union address... We followed this practice in subsequent years too. Subsequent years it was even earlier than what I'm indicating now. This was early in '61. Subsequent years it was normally even before Christmas. What we did was put together a book for the President to take with him to Palm Beach in subsequent years. This year why obviously he was in Washington. And we just put together a book. This book listed the possible legislative messages. Then we discussed it; met with the President. In later years we'd go down to Palm Beach. And it was over a period of a week. Every day for a week we'd meet with him and go over each one of the subjects in the book to see which ones were important enough for a Presidential message; which ones were important enough for just a Presidential

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letter; which ones should be sent to Congress from the department that was principally concerned; and which ones should be rejected, not used at all. After that decision was made we'd then draft a tentative, a very tentative time schedule because it was always subject to change and always was changed. And we never met the deadlines. And we'd take that up to the President. When he approved this general time schedule – the time schedule had all the things that had to be done prior to the State of the Union; prior to each message; it was kind of a programming device – then we would assign the messages to whoever was going to write them. Normally Ted would take half of them. I'd take a third or more and Lee White [Lee C. White] would have one or two. Then each person was responsible for his messages. He had to do all of the work connected with

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the message. And this meant getting in touch with the departments; getting an initial draft; going over the draft; getting it to Sorensen who, in most instances, wanted to see the message before it went in and in most instances would join with me, if I was responsible for the message in meeting with the President. In some instances he didn't and I'd take it with the President myself. For instance, the integration message Ted never had anything to do with. I would carry that straight through to the end and discuss it with the President; sent it to Congress and so on. But in most instances he was there. So, these were not drafted the same way as the State of Union message was drafted. Either Ted or I had the responsibility for almost every message that went to Congress. And if it was my responsibility then I had

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to do everything connected with it. If it was his responsibility he did everything. But he still

would look over most of my messages before they finally went up. Sometimes he didn't.

STEWART: What about your initial relationship with the departments and agencies? Did you run into any immediate problems as you recall?

FELDMAN: Well, the first thing we did when we first came in was attend the breakfast that Arthur Goldberg gave. Shortly after the Inauguration Day Goldberg gave a breakfast at his house to which he invited the heads of all the departments and invited me. I think he invited Sorensen and Sorensen was out then. This was kind of a get acquainted session for everybody at the first Cabinet meeting. I think beginning with that – that kind of set a tone – and beginning with that breakfast my relationship at least, with

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all of them were very, very good. They were close with some than with others. As we did with the messages we kind of assigned Cabinet officers among ourselves too. Well, we didn't assign it. But what happened was that the Cabinet officer grew accustomed to relying upon one White House staff man as his conduit to the President. He couldn't get in to see the President every time he wanted to. Kennedy and Johnson are quite different in the way in which they handle their Cabinet. Kennedy just wasn't available, perhaps, as often as Johnson was. And the Cabinet officers, indeed, would prefer sometimes to talk to the White House staff because the White House staff could get the answer for them quickly, or, in many instances, could give them the answer themselves and take care of the matter in the President's name.

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So, we developed a method of operation under which, running through the Cabinet Dean Rusk always talked to the President himself or he worked through Bundy [McGeorge Bundy]. Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], sometimes me and sometimes Sorensen. And McNamara always talked to the President himself. To run through the other Cabinet members Luther Hodges didn't talk to anybody except me. Ed Day it was either Dick Donahue [Richard K. Donahue] or I that he talked to. Stewart Udall and a lot of people; it was either I or Ed White or Ted Sorensen, one of the three of us, I guess, depending on the nature of the thing because his, the functions of his department were spread among all of us. Dean White would handle the power questions and dams and so on and I handled mineral questions and so on. Orville Freeman always talked to me because I took care of everything connected with agriculture.

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Ribicoff normally Sorensen. Let's see who else do we have? Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] used to talk to the President. Anyhow that's about the way it worked. Arthur Goldberg would talk to me and the President very often. But our relationships with the Cabinet

officers I thought were very good. Ed Day, as I said before, kind of resented I think the fact that he didn't get to see the President very much. I think Ribicoff did too. But it was not personal. I don't think it was directed at any members of the White House staff.

STEWART: You didn't feel any of the frustrations that people have often said they felt in dealing with the State Department as far as things getting lost in the bureaucracy or anything like that?

FELDMAN: Oh I had many frustrations with the State Department but...

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STEWART: As any of the other departments in this initial month or so?

FELDMAN: Well, I don't think anything ever got lost. When the President asked me to get something done I would follow it and make sure that it got done. The frustration was in getting the proper response quickly enough. But it would ultimately get done. And often he had frustrations in that he couldn't get the right information at the right time. We were all accustomed to acting quickly. This was the way we were brought up and this was the way we had to do it in all of our associations with Kennedy. Wheels of bureaucracy move very slowly. I think those things we didn't like. There is some questions as to whether the President fully controls the government. Or perhaps it's the other way around. The bureaucracy controls the President.

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STEWART: Do you remember any examples of situations like this in the first month or two?

FELDMAN: Well, yes. But I don't even think I want to talk about that one on this record; even this one because it's too personal, I think. Well, let me think about it. Maybe when we get to the subsequent things maybe I'll mention some of those. There are a number of them occur to me.

STEWART: Did you have any problems originally with any commitments that Eisenhower had made or did you run into this in the first few weeks?

FELDMAN: Well, one of the first questions that I had – I also handled the CAB and international air routes – one of the first questions I had involved the transpacific route. On the very last day of office Eisenhower had sent back the decision of the CAB in the transatlantic route case. And sending this back to the CAB meant

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that no decision would be rendered and it might not be rendered for a long time on the very important question of international air policy for the United States. I'm still not sure why he acted on the last day. He acted on January nineteenth. Why didn't he let the new President decide for himself what he wanted to do with this CAB decision? That embarrassed us. There were a couple of other items that were hanging over that he should have decided, but didn't that also embarrassed us. We were embarrassed both ways: By the decisions he made and by those that he didn't make. Many other decisions dealt with, as I remember, oil pipe lines which again the President had to approve. And a lot of steps had been taken during the Eisenhower Administration. And he just had to approve it without having control over it. It seems to me that the decisions

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should have been made prior to the time that he left office because all of the decisions leading up to it had been made. So, he ought to make the final one too. The transpacific route case was different. Then nothing had been done. All he had was the CAB recommendation. In international air route cases the decision of the CAB is not binding. It is just advisory to the President. The President can accept it; reject it or modify it. He can do anything he wants to with it. So, with that much freedom it seems to me that he should have left it to his successor to decide what to do. I don't know what's going to happen in the current transpacific route case. I happen to be involved in that now in behalf of an airline of flying tigers. But it would be somewhat ironic if – and I'm sure we won't conclude this case

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before 1968 – if Johnson should leave office in 1969 and the newspapers presented to him then he'd be in exactly the same position that Eisenhower was in. And I would hope he wouldn't sign the case but would leave it to the President that would come in afterwards. We also took over most of the Eisenhower staff. Any secretary or clerk who wanted to stay on we kept. We offered every one of them a job. About fifty percent stayed and the other fifty percent left. I don't think we were particularly embarrassed, too much embarrassed, by anything that Eisenhower had done. I think, as I say, that some cases he should have decided he didn't and at least one case he did decide that he shouldn't have. But it was a pretty good transition, I think.

STEWART: What about the first press conference which was televised and was held in the early evening?

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FELDMAN: Pierre had the idea even before we took office that we ought to have a freer press conference than Eisenhower had. He talked generally about having a press conference to which anybody could come. Then questions could be asked. And which would not be edited the way Eisenhower's were in any way. And Kennedy liked it from the beginning. And so we asked

him to see if he could work out some kind of format. And Pierre devised the format of having the White House press corps invited to be questioners. And there were a lot of minor problems. Do you have a man identify himself or not identify himself? If he identifies himself a lot of people will ask questions who just want to get on television. If they don't identify themselves you don't know who's talking and it loses some of the flavor. How do you select who asks the questions? Just anybody or do you give one

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flavor. How do you select who asks the questions? Just anybody or do you give one question to each wire service and one question to each network and so on? Well, Pierre worked all of these out and presented them to the President. I remember we discussed them at breakfast one morning. I guess I didn't come to the part where I talked about the breakfasts we used to have – and the President thought that it was good. I'm not sure whether he referred Pierre or whether Pierre didn't make a firm recommendation on it, but he felt pretty strongly that the man should not identify himself. On that issue he said, "I know most of the people there anyhow and I can select who I'm going to call on. And that way I'll have a greater control over the conference. So let's just have anybody

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ask for recognition who wants to ask a question and I'll select them and answer it." We all thought that was good. We all had a great deal of confidence in his ability to handle any question. I had seen him under the most adverse circumstances in impossible situations, neatly field every kind of question during the campaign. So, I didn't have much doubt about his ability to handle them. So then the only question was, "Where should they be held?" And Pierre went around and looked at various places, considered every place from those that Johnson had used in the White House to the one in the State Department that Dean Rusk uses. He finally decided that an auditorium would be the best place; it best suited Kennedy's style and selected the State Department auditorium which became the scene of the televised press conferences.

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I guess we generally considered them a success, but occasionally – I took an active part in all the press conferences – occasionally the President would come back from one of these press conferences and say, "Gee, we ought to cut those out. Why do I ever do them? They don't get good questions and if I don't get good questions why, the answers I give don't look so good. Maybe we ought to do something else." But he never really meant it. I think he was always quite pleased with the conference. I had a good deal to do with the press conferences and we'll come to that at some future time. I think he felt pretty good about them all the time.

STEWART: He was especially happy with his first one I assume.

FELDMAN: Yes, oh yes. I saw it afterwards. He was very pleased with it. He thought it had

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worked out very well. In fact everybody was – everybody was pleased. We didn't quite know before the conference how it would work out. We had been told that he would have to be careful about farm policy statements because it might upset the world and the fact that here the President of the United States, for perhaps the first time in history, was making nationally televised, unedited, extemporaneous remarks on most sensitive subjects. You know, all these things were firsts and you had to take a calculated risk perhaps. But with John F. Kennedy, why, there really was not that much doubt about the risk.

STEWART: Were the briefing procedures basically the same as those you had been using right along, or....?

FELDMAN: No. We modified them considerably. We developed

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them as time went on. But in the beginning we only did part of this. In the end we followed this whole procedure. The day before the press conference Salinger asked for what was called "press-briefing books" from each department. It was the duty of each department to summarize the important things that had happened during the past week in that department, and to pose the most difficult questions that could be asked with regard to those occurrences. Then there was a brief meeting with the President if he had time – he often skipped this – a brief meeting with the President on just running over generally the things that were in these books. We didn't cover it all. Pierre used his own discretion as to some of the highlights. And the President would indicate that he wanted some more information, perhaps. The morning of the press conference we always

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had breakfast together. I don't know whether I've described those breakfasts in one of the prior tapes, but at the breakfast was always Pierre; always Sorensen; always me; the President and the Vice President. Usually there was Bundy; and there was always either Dean Rusk or if he was out of town George Ball [George C. Ball]; and almost always Walter Heller [Walter Wolfgang Heller]. All of us had breakfast. The breakfast would begin early. They'd begin about eight o'clock and usually lasted until about ten o'clock. It was about a two hour breakfast.

During these breakfasts we would take turns going over the information that we had. First Pierre would lead off the discussion with the important questions he had gleaned from his briefing books. We didn't do it in the form of questions, we did it in the form of a discussion. "Well, how about

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this event?” “What would your reaction be to So and So?” or “What do you think about the prisoners in Red China?” “Suppose somebody asks you whether the Washington Monument ought to be torn down?” You know, that kind of thing. Following first, Sorensen, who had made up a list, would cover the most searching, the most difficult problems that he knew. They were usually quite different from Pierre’s. He got his out of the daily newspapers and the magazines. In fact, before he went to the press conference he would ask me – and he would do this too – to go through all the newspapers and magazines during the past week and pick out all the stories that might have any national importance. He’d call those to the President’s attention. Again, it wasn’t in the form of a question normally unless in the discussion a particularly difficult question would come to his mind. And then he’d say,

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“Well suppose May Craig [Elizabeth May Craig] asks you this.” And the President would sometimes tell him what he was going to say and sometimes he’d say, “That’s all right”, which meant he knew what the answer was, you don’t have to worry about that. And sometimes he’d have a quip. And after Sorensen I would go through the ones I had. Mine would deal with the problems I had handled. And very often they were outside the scope of the departments and sometimes they’d get into the press. And they would not be included in Ted’s because Ted Sorensen was not familiar with them. In the course of this Dean Rusk would join in. Dean Rusk and Mac Bundy and Walter Heller. They did not have separate questions. And towards the end often Walter Heller would give the President a brief, one page document describing the economic condition of the country so that if that question was asked the President was prepared for it.

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He got a pretty good briefing at three morning breakfasts, but that wasn’t the end. Invariably, at every single morning, without exception questions would be raised to which there was no answer. And the President would think of something on which he wanted to submit a statement. So he’d do two things when the breakfast was over. He’d assign to any of us, but I got most of the assignments I guess; Walter Heller got a good many and Dean Rusk would get some....He’d assign usually to one of the three of us, sometimes Sorensen, topics that we should find out more about and get him a statement on it, or a suggested question or a suggested question and suggested answer. So we’d have from ten o’clock through three o’clock to get that done. Secondly, where he was going to have a statement to open the press

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conference he’d assign to one of us – and Sorensen drew most of the statements, I would draw a few, Heller occasionally – he’d ask us to draw up a statement with which he could

open the press conference, making an announcement of some kind. We were supposed to get these in to him at two o'clock. Well, at two o'clock he was usually resting. He'd be in his room taking a bath or something. So, if we got them in at two o'clock he would have looked over them. And then we usually, not all of us, but Sorensen and I; sometimes Bundy, not often Bundy; but just Sorensen and I would go up to his bedroom – he was in the Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] bedroom – and he'd be stretched on his bed just relaxing after his bath. And we'd go over with him what we had developed between ten o'clock and three o'clock, and then leave for the studio about three forty-five. Press conferences

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were normally at four o'clock I think.

STEWART: I think that first one was later, around six.

FELDMAN: Later, around six. Then we had some at ten o'clock in the morning. And then we played with different times and different days and finally we settled on four o'clock as the best time. And most of them were at four o'clock towards the end.

STEWART: But this was basically the way it was done the first time?

FELDMAN: The first time we didn't do the earlier part of it. We did have the breakfast and we did go through the other mechanics. It was modeled after what we had done during the campaign for the debates. So, I think it worked out very well. And for me it was perhaps the most interesting part of my White House days. I just enjoyed those breakfasts. And we went without lunch on those days and that was fun.

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STEWART: Well, I think we're just about running out.

FELDMAN: Okay, your next....

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